







# Our Greatest Challenge

## Chapter 11

When I was taking the ministerial course at Pacific Union College, my professors would often talk about the importance of maintaining unity in the church.

I often felt impatient when they lectured on such things and somehow hoped they would soon get off that boring subject and talk about more nitty-gritty stuff.

Experience has taught me the wisdom and worth of their words. And could it be that the greatest challenge we face in the church is to love others who are different from us.

In this essay we shall study how the Lord converted the parochial Peter, who had a great deal of difficulty dealing with anyone outside of his small circle of fisherman friends.

If the church is going to grow then we must allow the Lord to help us overcome the twin barriers of tradition (as with Saul) and parochialism (as with Peter).

## **Peter's Parochial Nature**

It is easy to understand why Peter was parochial in nature. His whole life had probably centered around the people, sights, sounds and smells of the small Jewish fishing industry which flourished at the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus first called Peter, he was working with his brother Andrew, at the family fishing business: "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen" (Matthew 4:18).

It was at the Sea of Galilee that the Jesus chose to manifest to Peter His power as Lord of Creation. After Peter had lent his boat so Jesus could teach, He asked Peter to take the boat out a little further and let down their nets.

Even though the nets had been cleaned and it was the least favorable time of day to fish: "Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5). The catch was so great that the boat almost sunk. "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8)! This is the first time that Peter uttered the word "Lord," a term which is most commonly used in Luke/Acts and Paul.

It was again at the Sea of Galilee that Jesus affirmed His Lordship to Peter by saving his impetuous follower from certain death: "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, Lord, save me" (Matthew 14:30)! There is no doubt that Jesus' rescue of Peter from this (and many other embarrassments) played a role in his proclamation of Joel 2:32 on the day of Pentecost: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

The triumphs and failures that Peter experienced around his familiar Sea of Galilee were all overshadowed by Peter's denial of Jesus, around a fire, one cold evening in the heart of Jerusalem. According to Matthew, the final denial of Peter was made in the context of his identification with Jesus because of his Galilean accent: "After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, Surely you are one of them, for your accent (lalia) gives you away" (Matthew 26:73).

It seems from the story of Peter's denial and the story of Cornelius, in Acts 10, that one of the central weaknesses of Peter's character was being comfortable with groups which were different than his own. Perhaps, it could be said, that the scorning of his own ethnicity, (can anything good come out of Nazareth—or Northern Palestine where the Sea of Galilee lay) led Peter to display his true colors and deny His Lord:

Peter had not designed that his real character should be known. In assuming an air of indifference he had placed himself on the enemy's ground, and he became an easy prey to temptation. If he had been called to fight for his Master, he would have been a courageous soldier; but when the finger of scorn was pointed at him, he proved himself a coward.<sup>1</sup>

### **Peter's Conversion**

It is a principle in the Bible that they who live by the sword will die by the sword, you reap what you have sown. Although the innate prejudice in Peter is not revealed as clearly in the gospels, it becomes one of the central themes of his conversion process and demonstrates an important thesis: The Lord's conversion of our greatest weakness often becomes the source of our greatest effectiveness for ministry. That is to say, that the Lord is able to take those who oppose the gospel and through the process of conversion, they become its greatest champions.

While it can be argued that Peter was converted before the denial of his Lord, there can be no doubt that the love and forgiveness that Jesus showed his erring disciple deeply transformed the once proud fisherman's life. Up until this time, Peter had been honored and had witnessed a number of extraordinary events:

- Peter was the leader of the twelve.
- He had confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.
- Peter had witnessed the Transfiguration.

Despite these, and many other singular demonstrations of the miraculous, Peter had yet to learn the importance of submitting his will to the Lordship of Christ. The cutting off of the servant's ear in Gethsemane was proof positive that Peter had not yet learned the blood-sweat prayer of Jesus: "Not my will, but Thine be done."

Peter's life is a testimony that position or the witness of the miraculous is a substitute for truly making Jesus the one and only Lord of your life. Peter was willing to submit his will to the Lord when he saw his own impetuous self in contrast to the loving nature of Jesus. Although Peter was willing to cut off people's ears, Jesus did not cut him off when he had erred:

While the degrading oaths were fresh upon Peter's lips, and the shrill crowing of the cock was still ringing in his ears, the Saviour turned from the frowning judges, and looked full upon His poor disciple. At the same time Peter's eyes were drawn to his Master. In that gentle countenance he read deep pity and sorrow, but there was no anger there.<sup>2</sup>

The realization that he had struck the cruelest blow to His grieved, but loving Lord that night, drove Peter to a deeper repentance (the goodness of God leads us to repentance Romans

2:4) and conversion experience. The Lord graciously granted Peter an opportunity to thrice confess his newly deepened loyalty near his beloved and familiar Sea of Galilee:

The third time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, Do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my sheep (John 21:17).

### **Peter's Sermon at Pentecost**

Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost proclaimed the profound mystery and irony that the crucified Jesus, who had suffered the wrath of God (for cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree), has been exalted to the right hand of God and made Lord of all. Despite the fact that the miraculous sign at Pentecost is the speaking in other languages (which seems to point to a universal proclamation across all ethnic and cultural lines), Peter does not address the Jews of the Diaspora, but those people from his own homeland.

“But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say’” (Acts 2:14). It would seem that in the mind of Peter, the “everybody” in Acts 2:21 refers specifically to the Jews who were guilty of both unbelief and the crucifixion of the Messiah.

Just as Peter had called on the name of the Lord to save him from drowning, so they could call on that same Name to be delivered from their sin and guilt. Little did Peter realize that the Lord was preparing him to further unfold the text in Joel 2:32: “Everyone [And not just those within his own group] who calls on the name of the Lord, shall be saved.”

Peter could preach with conviction that Jesus indeed was the Lord. The miraculous conversions of Pentecost were followed with the energetic expansion of the church, despite the opposition of both religious and political authorities. In the minds of the faithful, there was but one Lord that was to be obeyed: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:19).

### **Peter's Ground Breaking Visit With Cornelius**

The capstone of the Lord's conversion of Peter was the miraculous timing and content of the vision Peter received on the rooftop in Joppa concerning Cornelius and his household. This divinely-inspired event had convinced Peter that the Lord was asking him to play a part in removing the age-old barriers that had existed between Jew and Gentile. Peter testified at the Jerusalem Council: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7).

The Lord was opening up the doors of the church to all those who would believe. And the cautious but willing Peter in following His Lord, helped break down the high barriers of Jewish exclusion. On arriving at the home of Cornelius, Peter clearly understands the import of the vision given to him the previous day: He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

Despite his apparent struggles and misgivings about the whole adventure, Peter chose to obey the Lord and follow His way instead of his own inclinations. Peter’s deepening conversion was the result of his initial commitment to follow the Lord near the shores of his familiar Galilee after the resurrection. This willingness to follow the Lord, to surrender ourselves to do His will, is certainly one of the hallmarks of the Christian life.

Peter himself probably never imagined and would have never chosen to be the first to break through the barriers the Lord wanted to shatter by His grace. Yet despite his weaknesses, God chose to further the conversion of Peter in a dramatic way so the church might overcome ethnic and cultural barriers and finish the proclamation at Pentecost: “Everybody that calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

After the dual vision of Peter and Cornelius (paralleled in Acts 9 by the two-fold vision given to Saul and Ananias), Peter begins by saying: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:34-36). It is Peter that affirms the fact that Jesus is “Lord of all” before the Holy Spirit fell on those assembled. Peter, unlike Jonah, had obeyed the word of the Lord to “Go” and preach the gospel to people outside his sphere of concern.

In Peter’s current view of God’s grace, the Lord could only accept those who “fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:35). It would remain for a proud Pharisee to proclaim that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). At the watershed Jerusalem Council of 49 AD, Peter rose up and spoke eloquently about how salvation is by grace and not by works for both the Jewish and Gentile believers:

After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:7-11).

Although Peter would falter at Antioch after this, his willingness to follow the Lord in a deepening conversion experience, broadened the gospel net and allowed a much wider variety of fish to be included into the fellowship of believers. Their conversion can be summarized as follows:

THE CONVERSION AND TESTIMONY OF PETER AND PAUL

	Peter	Paul
Historical Event	Acts 10–Initial Historical Account Emphasis: Providence to the household of Cornelius.	Acts 9–Initial Historical Account Emphasis: Paul is healed of his physical and spiritual blindness.
Apologetic	Acts 11–Peter testified before the skeptical legalists in Jerusalem Emphasis: Faith in Jesus removes all distinctions.	Acts 22–Paul testifies before the hostile legalists in Jerusalem Emphasis: Christ’s appearance to him on the road to Damascus.
Ratification	Acts 15–Before the legal authority of the Church. Emphasis: God does not show favoritism but accepts all who believe.	Acts 26–Before the legal authority of Rome. Emphasis: Christ commissions Him on the road to Damascus.

God used the conversion of two key leaders to greatly expand the horizons of the New Testament church. The lord of tradition was overcome through the conversion of Paul and the lord of parochialism was overcome through the conversion of Peter. These two dramatic turning points are glued together structurally in the giving of the twin visions of Acts 9 and 10:

THE DUAL VISIONS OF ACTS 9 AND 10

	Acts 9	Acts 10
Initial Vision	Saul—Jewish Pharisee	Cornelius—Roman God fearer
Question	Who are you Lord?	What is it Lord?
Judgment	Persecuting	Generous
Lord's Command	Go to the city—Told what to do	Send for Peter—House by the sea
Secondary Vision	Ananias—Church leader	Peter—Church leader
Reaction	Wondering—About Saul	Wondering—about the vision
Lord's Command	Go to Saul	Go to Cornelius
Ministry	Sermon Holy Spirit—Blindness healed, Bap.	Sermon Holy Spirit—Tongues, Baptism
Purpose	Ananias was sent to Saul in order to commission him to:  “Carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).	Peter was sent to Cornelius' house in order to teach:  “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

### Summary

In a relay, the first runner races down the track. They exert themselves to the limit, knowing that the runner up ahead is preparing to pick up the pace. It would seem that in the providence of God, the Lord ran Peter out of the blocks first. Perhaps, it could be said that Stephen was meant to take the baton, but the opponents decided to eliminate him from further participation. Instead, by a miraculous irony, Jesus converts the strongest runner of the opposition, who switches lanes in order to take the baton further down the track to fulfill the Great Commission beyond any of their wildest dreams.

Unlike Peter, the cosmopolitan Paul probably felt more at home in the Areopagus of Athens than in the Jewish center of Jerusalem. Whereas Peter had one of his greatest embarrassments in not eating with the Gentiles in Antioch, while Paul took a misstep when he agreed to the conservative demands to shave his head in Jerusalem.

Unlike Peter's life which had centered around Galilee, Paul had been born in the cosmopolitan Tarsus yet educated in strict school of the Pharisees in Jerusalem. In fact, Paul saw that the Lord Himself had indeed ordained a two-fold ministry:

On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles (Galations 2:7,8).

Whereas the Lord converted the exclusivist Peter in order to overcome the ethnic barriers within the church, the Lord converted the legalist Paul in order to overcome its theological barriers. It cannot be emphasized enough that these twin conversions which are given prominence in the Book of Acts are recorded to show the people of God just how to love those who are different from us. May the Lord lead us to strike the right balance, His balance in these issues today.

### **Endnotes**

1. Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), pages 711-712.
2. *Ibid.*, page 712.